Assessing Staff on the Competencies

First, ask if the goal of your institution is to hold specific employees to specific competencies to ensure that quality is met on an individual basis, or if those in charge of competencies at the library want only to gauge the general training needs of staff and offer training accordingly. If the library is less concerned about individual accountability, consider taking the shortest route and sending out anonymous questionnaires or assessments to staff in order to determine where the general training gaps are.

If the library is concerned about individual skill levels and accountability, however, there are several methods available for individual assessments.

Test of Current Skills

The most accurate way to assess someone's skills is by testing those skills, by asking questions about knowledge and by objectively assessing abilities. Make the assessments as objective as possible. Leave as few questions as possible (preferably none) open ended, where the response could be subjectively evaluated. This means making the questions largely multiple choice, true/false, and labeling (for parts of the computer or screen).

The tests can take the form of a simple paper-and-pencil exam, an online exam (using tools like SurveyMonkey to create a free survey/test), or software that will actually ask the user to perform certain tasks and track mouse clicks and keyboard strokes to determine if the task was completed correctly.

As much as we would like to believe the best of our coworkers, you will absolutely need to address the possibility of cheating. Users might do a quick Web search to find an answer they don't know, or ask a coworker who already took the assessment. If you are truly going to test to get an objective measurement of an employee's skills, doing so in a controlled test environment is the only way to be 100 percent accurate. The task force should consider the opportunities for cheating and elimnate as many of them as possible.

Testing has another serious downside, which is why you see it in very few libraries. Staff members may worry that their scores will go on their records, be in their evaluations, or be used against them to unfairly compare them to other staff members or to justify their firing. Because that is the case, their reactions to the competency process as a whole (training included) is much more likely to be hostile, defensive, and generally disgruntled. There are other assessment methods that you can use to avoid this "test and bristle" response.

Survey of Current Practice

D. Scott Brandt suggests that you can assess competencies with a survey, not a test of particular skills or knowledge, but rather questions targeting current practice of the staff member. Table 9 (see page 45) provides an example from his book, *Teaching Technology: A How-To-Do-It Manual for Librarians*.[1]

Brandt also suggests: "Rather than ask, 'Are you satisfied with searching?' ask questions about what they are trying to achieve, 'Do you get too many unrelated results when you search? Do you regularly use more than one search engine? Do you mostly do one-word searches or do you use phrases?"[2] These questions are inquiring as to skill level, amount of use, and current practice—but you don't realize that unless you stop and think about it. These three pieces of information—skill level, use level, and current practice—can all help you decide what staff members need in terms of training.

Table 9: D. Scott Brandt suggests assessing competencies with a survey in his book (p. 14), *Teaching Technology: A How-To-Do-It Manual for Librarians* (Neal-Schuman, 2002; www.neal-schuman.com/db/2/272.html). *Source:* Neal-Schuman Publishers. Reprinted with permission.

Survey on how you currently deal with e-mail					
Circle a number to answer the following questions . . .	Never	Not Often	Not Sure	Often	Always
Do you check your e-mail more than once a day?	1	2	3	4	5
Do you prioritize e-mail in your in-box?	1	2	3	4	5
Do you use folders to separate e-mail?	1	2	3	4	5

Self-Assessment

Because the library world is so often a positive and often open-minded one most libraries opt for self-assessment for their staff members—trusting staff members to be honest about what they do and do not know, especially if they have been reassured that "not knowing" is completely acceptable at the outset of the implementation of the competencies. However, even in this case, you will still need to watch for staff members who misrepresent their knowledge levels. If the training coordinator or the manager can communicate with people who work with the person on a regular basis, misrepresentation will become clear enough.

If you are using self-assessments, I recommend avoiding the "yes I meet it/no I don't meet it" binary that has the potential for garnering inaccurate responses. Here are some alternate options:

- Have three choices for whether or not the employee has each competency: yes, no, or maybe/don't know.
- Ask about the employee's experience with a particular competency, and quantify that with a few choices: none, little, some, and a lot.
- Singer Gordon suggests that employees rate whether they are confident, somewhat confident, or not confident in their skills in particular areas.[3]
- Ask if employees feel that they have the various competencies in a basic, intermediate, or advanced level.

You are far more likely to get honest responses with these sliding scales than with a simple yes/no question. If an employee doesn't know something, he or she is more likely to mark "maybe" than "no." When it comes down to evaluating the assessment results, perhaps a "maybe" counts the same as a "no," and a "little" may count just like a "none." The trick is that staff members don't necessarily need to know that.

Peer Assessment

Another option is to have a supervisor work with the employee and perform what is called an "observation assessment." In this model, the supervisor works with the employee on the list of competencies, asking the employee to perform or discuss each one, and then the supervisor makes the ultimate judgment as to whether the employee has that competency or not.

One other peer assessment model is to have every employee's skill level evaluated by everyone who works with that person. Angelique Lee describes this model:

> Yet another method in assessing competencies is multi-rater feedback, more commonly known as 360 degree feedback. Multi-rater feedback is commonly used for developmental purposes in an organization. Multi-rater feedback is a process where feedback is elicited from a person's manager, his or herself, the person's peers, and his or her direct reports.[4]

In a competency setting, this would mean asking an employee, his or her managers, peers, and supervisees about whether or not the employee has various competencies. If using this model, I recommend a simplified questionnaire—not asking specifically about each competency, but rather asking for ratings by category or group (e.g., asking if the person is competent in all the required skills in, for example, Operating Systems, instead of asking about each skill separately).

Assessment Format

A decision also needs to be made about how to conduct the assessment. The basic options are on paper or online. Implementing assessments online is, by far, the most efficient method, and almost every one of the options above, except for the first peer-assessment option, can be implemented online. This can be accomplished with a simple Web form that exports to a database, or with SurveyMonkey or other similar free or fee-based survey sites (that function just as well as test/assessment sites). There are also a number of fee-based software options that will test an employee's skills by asking him or her to perform certain tasks and software that will help you create tests and assessments in a more structured way than the survey sites do, as well as offering more options for manipulating and evaluating the end data.

Offering the assessment online may not be an option, especially if it is regarded as a barrier for the lowest-skilled staff member. In this case, paper assessments may be offered. Depending on the assessment style you choose, employees may be asked to check boxes, circle correct answers, or mark the correct level for their abilities on a rating scale. Compiling the results of paper assessments can be quite cumbersome, so if choosing this option, budget appropriate time for doing so.

Additional Assessment Tips

There are some additional assessment tips that apply to all assessment styles and formats.

- If you send out the assessment separately from the competencies list, emphasize once again the competencies purpose statement and reassure staff members that they are not expected to have all of the competencies right away. Review some of the tips given in the last chapter about presentation of the competencies to staff, and use the same tips here in this step.
- All employees subject to the competencies should be given the assessment at the same time.
- Give staff members a deadline by which they need to return the assessment and consequences if the deadline is not met (e.g., departments that meet the deadline get a pizza party; those that do not, sadly, get no pizza). I made the mistake of leaving it open-ended the first time I sent out an assessment, and two years later I had still not received an entire unit's assessments, despite consistent badgering. Deadlines make people work faster. It's a law of nature somehow.
- All new employees should complete the assessment immediately. This can be added to any "new-hire checklists" the library may have on file. New-hire assessment results should be discussed with the employee and his or her supervisor and a training plan developed as a result.
- In addition to asking about the employees' current skill levels, consider including additional questions about where, in regard to skill level, they would *like* to be in terms of their technology skills. Have one or more questions at the end of the assessment asking if there are particular areas that they would like more training in, or in which they would like to see self-improvement—including areas not described in the competencies list. What do staff members *want* to learn? This is important information for any trainer.

What to Do with Assessment Results

Individual Results

If the assessments were not structured and were implemented as self-assessments, each employee should most definitely see the results of his or her assessment. Each unit manager and immediate supervisor should be given the assessment results of the employees they supervise. Results should also, of course, be given to the training coordinator or the equivalent manager of the competencies project. A secure password-protected file should be kept that records the exact results for each staff member. If the assessments were made with an appropriate online tool, you may be lucky enough to have a handy ready-made spreadsheet with everyone's results. These initial assessments should be kept as a baseline to which to compare future assessments.

Overall Results

The training coordinator also needs to look at the overall patterns in the assessment results. These patterns should also be kept as a baseline to which to compare future assessments. But more than that, the patterns should be examined to identify training needs. How many staff members need training on which topics? Which training sessions can be provided in-house? How much staff time is going to be required to prepare the necessary materials for those classes? Which training sessions will require bringing in outside trainers or sending staff to off-site training? These and other questions will need to be answered as we move into the training phase of the competencies process. The training coordinator, the competencies task force, and the library's management will need to realistically discuss the emergent training needs of the library staff and what it will take to meet those needs. We're talking staffing and budget recommendations at this point.

Training Needs Determinations

At this point there are three options for determining the training needs of staff.

1. The training coordinator can look at the assessment results and recommend specific classes or topics based on patterns in competency gaps.
2. Supervisors can be responsible for doing the same for each employee they supervise.
3. Employees can review their own assessments and determine their training needs.

If the training coordinator is given the responsibility, then supervisors need to back the training coordinator's decisions to their employees. If the supervisor is given this role instead, then each supervisor should be given a method by which to determine how assessment answers match up to training needs to ensure uniformity of application across departments and units. If employees are left to determine their own training needs, they should also be given methods or tools to use to decide which training sessions will benefit them most. If either of the first two options is chosen, there is also the question of whether or not training recommendations are just that, *recommendations*, or requirements. If they are requirements, the process becomes a bit less friendly and a lot more like orders being given.

If the third option is chosen, each staff member can look at the competencies he or she needs and then outline a personal plan of action—how he or she will meet the competency requirements through a self-study, classes, continuing education, etc. This places the responsibility with the staff member and enables the individual to choose the path to training. Some attention should be paid to whether or not staff members who need training are actually self-motivated enough to take classes. Some staff may need a gentle (or not-so-gentle) nudge to learn the things they need to know.

In any of the above scenarios, the training coordinator needs to make sure to fully communicate the different ways people can develop the competencies they don't already have, all the various training opportunities available to them.

Set a Time Line for Completion

Now that the quantity of training needed is known, set a date by which staff members are expected to have all competencies. Be generous in the time allowed. The amount of time all depends on how many staff members need how much training and how much staff time the library has devoted to giving that training. This time line I recommend as a ballpark figure is one year. Multiple training cycles should occur during this time. Be sure to allow plenty of time and opportunity for staff members to get the training they need, but be clear with staff members that they are expected to attempt to have the required competencies by a given date. That date will be the date of the second round of assessments.

Notes

1. D. Scott Brandt, *Teaching Technology: A How-To-Do-It Manual for Librarians* (New York: Neal-Schuman, 2002), 14.
2. Ibid., 16.
3. Rachel Singer Gordon, *Teaching the Internet in Libraries* (Chicago: American Library Association, 2001), 16.
4. Angelique Lee, "Competency Assessment," 1999, on the Web site of the University of North Texas Center for Collaborative Organizations, www.workteams.unt.edu/old/reports/lee99.html (accessed January 9, 2007).